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Katelyn Ruiz

Graduate student presents research conclusions at Summit on Nurture and Retention

“During my work in youth ministry, I collected many informal testimonies of how teens and young adults didn’t feel welcome in church, and it wasn’t because of anything anybody said,” says Katelyn Ruiz, who completed her master’s degree in communication at Andrews University in December 2013. “Starting with their shared experiences, I attempted to define that discomfort in terms of the nonverbal behaviors church members exhibit while communicating on behalf of the church group.”

In November, Ruiz presented her research at the General Conference’s Summit on Nurture and Retention. She was the only graduate student invited to do so. Her paper, “Welcoming Nonverbal Behaviors: A Case Study of Group Communication and Visitor Impressions,” explored the nonverbal

behaviors — as defined by the use of time, space and body language — which contribute to a visitor feeling welcome or unwelcome during their first visit to a church.

“There are no neutral nonverbal behaviors,” says Ruiz. “Every action is seen as either positive or negative.”

Her research found that first-time visitors don’t reflect on their individual interpersonal encounters with church members and volunteer greeters in terms of how that single person made them feel, but how the church as a whole did or did not welcome them.

“This sense of welcome then influences a visitor’s decision to attend the church again or not,” she says. “We as church members and volunteers can be intentional about helping visitors feel welcomed in our churches, and in turn make them want to return.”

Following Ruiz’s presentation, Duane McBride, president of the Association of Adventist Human Subjects Researchers, wrote to Rachel Williams-Smith, chair of the Department of Communications at Andrews University.

“Katelyn’s presentation was at the very highest level,” said McBride. “Her data was sound, her style of presentation very effective, and her impact was very strong. She has contributed to the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in a meaningful way and has opened the door for other excellent graduate students to participate in scholarly discourse within the Adventist church.”

Delyse Steyn, graduate coordinator for the Department of Communication, worked with Ruiz as she conducted her research and was more than pleased with the results.

“Katelyn has bridged the objectives of the department’s graduate program, its emphasis on research within a theological context and the mission of the church as well as the university’s goals of seeking knowledge, affirming faith and changing the world,” says Steyn.

“Communication is key to effective practice within the church, university, community and our relationships on all levels.”

Ruiz hopes to pursue a doctorate degree in communication to implement and support institutional programs that help change the way we look at nurturing members and retaining believers in the Adventist church.

“I hope my research provides the foundation for building a toolkit for churches and a training program for greeters,” says Ruiz. “If we can be intentional in our attentions, we can better share the love of Jesus with those who enter into our midst.”

For more information on the Summit on Nurture and Retention, including more on Ruiz’s presentation, visit <http://www.adventistarchives.org>. For more information on the communication graduate program at Andrews University, visit andrews.edu/cas/comm/graduate.

Becky St. Clair, media relations manager,
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The Andrews University Wind Symphony performed its Christmas concert in the Howard Performing Arts Center in December 2013. Directed by Alan Mitchell, the event included a performance by the University’s jazz ensemble, as well as a piece directed by conducting student Frances Serpa Ferreira. Each of the Department of Music major ensembles perform throughout the year; for information on upcoming concerts, contact the Department office at 269-471-3555. For information on events at the Howard Center, visit <http://howard.andrews.edu>.

Joshua Martin